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CHAPTER FIVE

Jungle Lore and Etiquette

OUR front door overlooked an alluring crystal-clear stream where it joined the sea. When I asked what the name of the Yirrkala camp meant, I was told: 'Oh, that is the water where the camp is made.' This beach by the sea was a favoured camping-ground and scores of Yulengor drank from the stream. A white man drinks from a bush stream by cupping his hands, or by blowing away the dust on the surface and putting his lips to the water; but Yulengor flip the water into their mouths. Out in the bush, when we were hot and thirsty, we came to a small soak in the hills, whereupon most of the men wandered off for strips of paper-bark or large green leaves from which they drank after deftly twisting them into drinking cups. Scores of these saccules lay around the soak, where they had been used at other times.

Apt terms describe methods of drinking. 'Wiaktun' is used of the baling of a canoe, which is accomplished by throwing the water out in a shell or the cupped hands; and the same word is applied to tossing water into the mouth. 'Dthurara-luptun' is a word-picture of drinking with the lips in the stream, for 'dthurara' is a doorway, river-entrance, or human mouth, and 'luptun' is the present tense of the verb 'to wash'.

In spite of the constant use of spears and the skill necessary in handling them, accidents do occur. Marjirry, a lad of about sixteen, one day left the station for a day's hunting. He stalked a kangaroo and speared it, but missed all the

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FROM HAND TO MOUTH

Old men sometimes demand a further treatment of the food, and the partly cooked damper is then kneaded into a wide, thin layer and rolled into bark before being re-baked. By this final process the 'ngutu' becomes impregnated by tabu, and only fully initiated males may eat it. I have seen men delirious in the cycad season; though not showing other ill effects, they do not recover for several weeks. Kuninyal suffered in this way, and I remember he was the sport of the camp and became thin and haggard through not being able to hunt for himself. It was openly stated that he had been eating half-cooked cycad cakes.

Many nuts, berries, and fruits are found in the bush, but they are not very enticing. Some are as large as cherries, but the majority are the size of currants. Wild cashew nuts, ripening at the end of the dry season, are the most favoured of all. Small bright red and orange cashew fruit are attached to kidney-shaped brown nuts which are full of prussic acid. A thick skin on the nut also contains acid, and it is roasted to extract the kernel, which tastes like a tiny potato with a peanut flavour. In the roasting process, acid spurts from the fire, and fumes in the smoke severely burn anyone near by. Children develop scaly blisters, and women tending the cooking fires receive extensive burns.

'Larrani' trees, with their grey branches and large green waxy leaves, make a gay sight when they are loaded with bunches of ripe red fruit. The fruit looks like red apples, but they have large woody kernels and very little flesh. Large quantities are gathered, and hunters use them to slake their thirst; but I must confess to finding that their astringency only increased my desire for water.

Another popular fruit comes from the beautiful East Indian tamarind tree, which thrives and bears prolifically around old Macassar watering-places. The seed pods are filled with a pleasant acidulous brown pulp which can be stored, but nomads strip the trees and eat the fruit long before it is ripe.